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# At Jane's

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## At Jane's · Gerald Stern

*For Gil Orlovitz, 1919–1974*

I touch the rose to see what happens there  
before I go inside to eat, I pull  
the clothes-line down and kick the cracked cement,  
I howl to myself for mercy. One more time  
I walk through the rotten tomatoes. I will end  
with little leaves on my shoes, with spoonfuls of mud,  
with a beating heart, with a mouth that's open —  
I hold my arm out straight like a dirty drunk,  
I walk the plank between the rhododendron  
and the little pear. For all I know  
I could live here happy, I could walk  
from here to the river and back without a thought.  
I could stop at the Super-America  
and read the morning paper. I could sit  
at my pancake dreaming of heaven, smiling like a lamb,  
listening vaguely to all the garbage, finding  
my cave and my twine, my dark place, chewing and listening  
while inside I wander—I beg for justice—I crawl  
through hell for a little justice. I turn to the wall  
and sing a little, and dance a little—  
just as the fall is breaking on the Ohio,  
the leaves are turning yellow, in Marietta,  
the backyards stretching out for hundreds of yards  
the way they do in America, all that richness,  
all that Utopia, wasted, a little dog  
howling out there, inside we're barking, inside  
I'm finding another heaven, I'm turning around  
this way and that, I'm finding my hole in the sun . . .  
We're talking now about Spanish music, the difference  
in soul between northern Europe and southern Europe;

we're talking now about Crete, we're talking  
about Robert Lowell and Delmore Schwartz; I'm lecturing  
on Orlovitz, I'm talking about his sonnets,  
I'm talking about his death on West End Avenue,  
about the poet we lost, about his life,  
about the dull politics of poesy,  
about the nineteenth century, about Keats,  
eighty miles from Wheeling, West Virginia,  
a million miles from Rome. Poor Orlovitz,  
he wrote 500 poems. I remember the letters:  
"Is this a poem, could you send me twenty bucks?"  
What do I do with him now? He fell in the street  
in front of a doorman; oh his death was superb,  
the doorman blew his whistle, Orlovitz climbed  
into a yellow cab, he'd never disappoint  
a doorman. Now I'm brooding a little, absent,  
the way I get, listening to the refrigerator,  
the only music we have in North America,  
cursing the Reagans a little, saying inside  
one of Orlovitz's poems, going back again  
into the cave, remembering Shelley's words  
about his cave, and Vergil's, and Milton's, knowing  
that mine is like theirs, a half mile underground,  
where you go on your knees, where you keep the candle outside—  
the underground journey—shivers and tremblings. We walk  
to the river after breakfast, I'm in heaven,  
I saw the meadow, I heard the voices, I felt  
the light on my face—in Marietta, Ohio—  
with Rachael Stern and Jack Killian and Jane  
Somerville, there are alleys between the yards,  
it is the oldest city in Ohio,  
I wore my black suit for the reading, I roared  
and whispered through forty poems, I sat like a lamb  
in the mayor's living room, I sat like a dove  
eating cheese and smiling, talking and smiling,  
thinking my thoughts, my wise and tender thoughts,  
the mayor's palace, Marietta, Ohio.